

# STONE STATUETTES FROM EASTER ISLAND

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A stone statuette, said to be an “ancient piece” from Easter Island, was for sale recently on eBay. It looked a bit too perfect, too polished. It prompted me to review some small statuettes that I had seen and photographed on the island in 1981 and 1982. While the item on eBay is controversial, I know that those we examined on the island were authentic, having been collected in the field by the Centro de Estudios (University of Chile). These have not been published previously.

This brief paper will also examine a type of petroglyph on Easter Island referred to as “mini-moai” because they resemble a scaled down version of the statues (Lee 1993:34) and their possible relationship – if any – to the little statuettes.

During my years of research on Easter Island and as part of my rock art documentation project, crewmembers and I, on a rainy days, photographed, measured, and drew several statuettes in the collection of the Centro de Estudios. Most of the little figures that we examined were found in various archaeological contexts around the island. Invariably they are lumpy

and poorly formed (Figure 1). Minimal effort went into making these; some have only a line to indicate a neck; others were carved to resemble small *moai*. Most have depressions to indicate eyes (Figures 2 and 3).

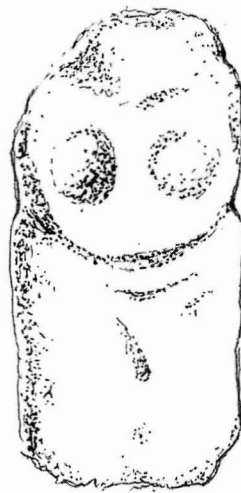


Figure 2. The figure is 7 cm tall, 3.7 cm wide and 3 cm thick.

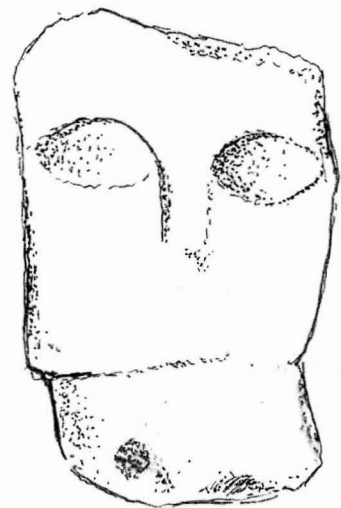


Figure 3. This stone head is 9.3 cm tall, 6.4 cm wide and 3.5 cm thick.

Some of the statuettes resemble the petroglyphs that we subsequently discovered and dubbed “mini-moai,” (see below), however, the examples in the Centro de Estudios were carved from “found rocks.” Many are of basalt, some of Rano Raraku tuff, and a few are carved from pieces of red scoria.

The little statuettes from the Centro de Estudios are similar to small stone figures or heads that were found in the *ahu* fill at Ahu Akivi by William Mulloy and Gonzalo Figueroa

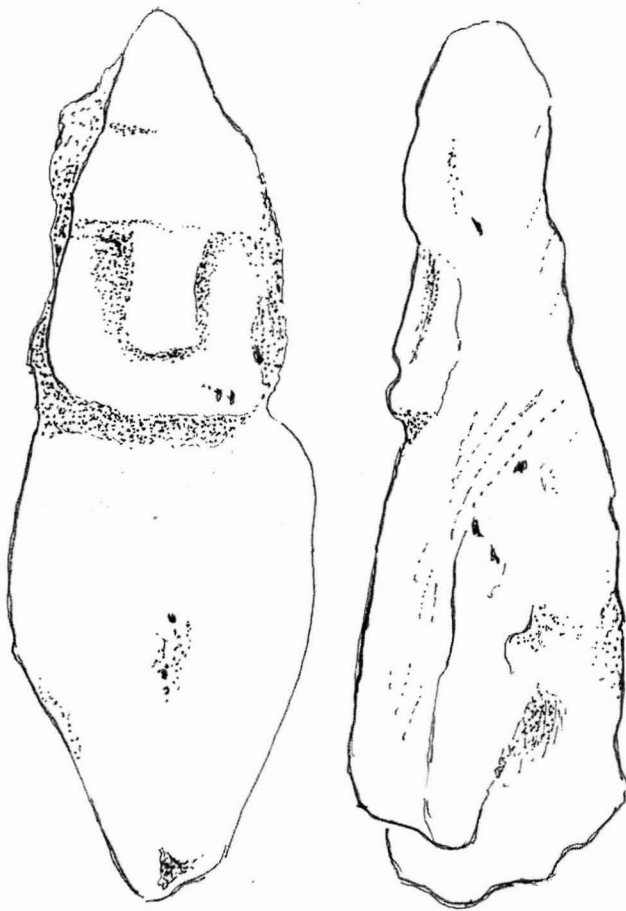


Figure 1. Front and side sketch of a small figure of vesicular scoria, Collection, Centro de Estudios (37 cm high, 13 cm by 11 cm thick).

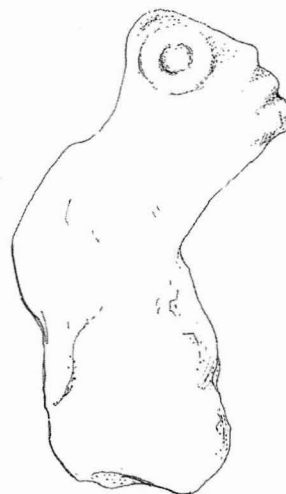


Figure 4. a) drawing and b) photo of a stone figure, Centro de Estudios (27 cm tall, 13 cm by 14 cm). (Photo by Tom Hoskinson).

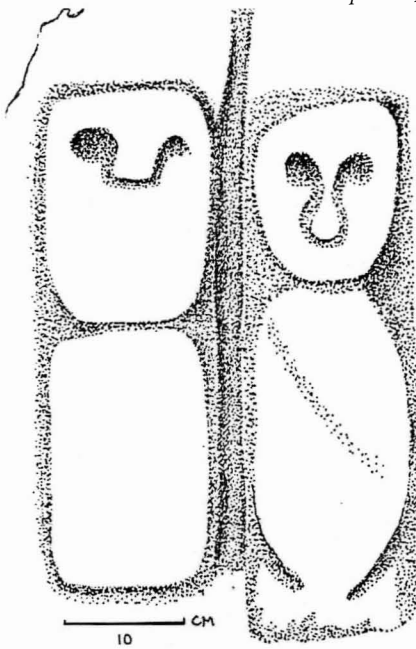


Figure 5. Two “mini-moai” that adjoin each other. Ava o Kir. (Lee 1992: Fig. 4:15,1).

torium behind the *ahu*. Mulloy also recovered a few from his excavations at Vinapu (Mulloy 1961).

What is striking about the statuettes is the minimal effort that went into creating them. They appear to have started out as suggestive lumps of stone and then were modified by a few lines or a bit of pecking to create eyes or a neckline, thus giving them a vague suggestion of human/*moai* figures.

The head of one figure shown in Mulloy and Figueroa (1978:199; Figure 41) is of particular interest in that it twists sideways, thrusts upward, and has bulging eyes. These elements bring it stylistically close to one of the examples from the collection at the Centro de Estudios (Figures 4a and 4b).

Heyerdahl (1976: Plate 157) illustrates many small stone statuettes that were collected by various visitors to the island, some from very early dates, such as Geiseler in 1882 (Ayres and Ayres 1995), and the visit of the *La Flore* in 1872 (Altman 2004). Called “crude imitations of the unfinished statues below the quarries...” these are close to the examples found by Mulloy and Figueroa. Another carving collected by Geiseler from a stone house at ‘Orongo is shown in Forment (1990:277, Plate 95). Geiseler’s example is, however, at 40 cm, outside the size range for those we are discussing here. Forment (ibid: Figures 206-208) illustrates three others that she calls “busts”; again, two of them are larger than the figures at the Centro de Estudios.

Might the small and minimally-carved stone statuettes in the collection of the Centro have been some kind of offering to the dead? The fact that similar examples were recovered from the crematorium at Akivi indicates that they might have served that purpose. They are simply and crudely made and perhaps were intended for just such a transitory purpose. Once deposited, they no longer were of any significant value. If they were intended as offerings in crematoria or elsewhere, such as *ahu* fill, perhaps there was no necessity for fine carving and elegant details, typical of most of the artistic output

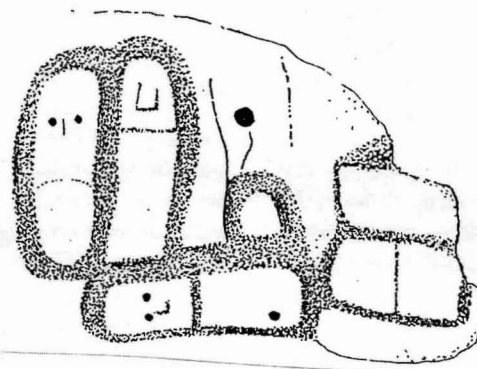


Figure 6. “Mini-moai” found on the south coast. The figures are often carved in clusters (Lee 1992: Fig. 4:15, 3,4).

(1978). Of the fourteen examples found at Akivi, most are of basalt, a few were created from red scoria, and one is carved of Rano Raraku tuff. Seven of these were located in the crema-

of the Rapanui.

In contrast to the little statuettes, we discovered and documented petroglyphs that we call “mini-moai” (Lee 1992). These small *moai* figures had not been recognized in the past, although Lavachery (1939) sketched some of them at Rano Raraku. He wrote, “It seems to me that we are not dealing with petroglyphs, in the true sense of the word, but, rather, with graffiti” (ibid.:57).

Mini *moai* are usually found on basalt outcrops, and often in association with other motifs. They are legless but may have arms shown. Eyes are often carved and facial features may be indicated (Figure 5). A neckline is common, as is the navel. They often occur in clusters, side by side or head to head (Figure 6), and some are associated with straight pecked lines (Figure 7). We documented 117 of these small figures on the island, ranging in size from 15 cm to 90 cm. Most are made by simple pecked outline, but a few are carved in bas relief (Lee 1992: Figures 4.15 and 4.17) (Figure 8). Because they are faint and were

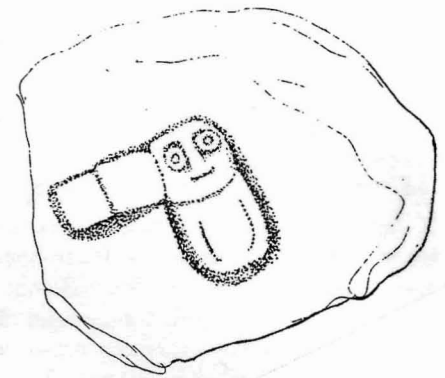


Figure 7. “Mini-moai” from O’one on the south coast of Easter Island. Pecked straight lines are often associated (Lee 1992: Fig. 4:15, 2).

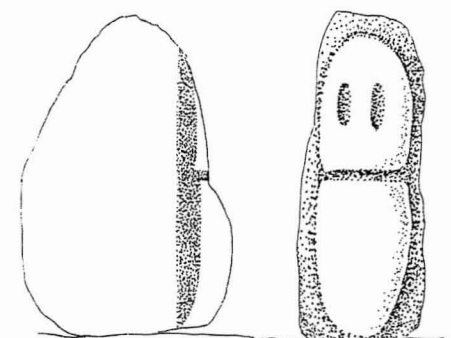


Figure 8. Side and front view of figure carved on a small boulder at Vai Atare.

carved to accommodate natural contours of the rock, it is very easy to overlook them. For that reason, we expect that more of these will be found in the future.

It is important to note that these petroglyphs were not small statues "in the process" of being carved. Because of the method of carving, that is, an outline pecked into rock surfaces, it is clear that they were not intended to be removed from the matrix of the rock. Some of these figures were obviously made at a later phase in the island's history because we also found them carved on the side of an unfinished statue at Rano Raraku (Lee 1992: Figure 4:19), and on an abandoned red scoria statue head near the site of Tahai.

The small statues have some context in that many of them are associated with burials or crematorium, but the *mini-moai* are fixed in place. There is no ethnographic material that gives any indication of their function. They are, however, often associated with other petroglyphs, as part of a larger collection of designs. At Ava o Kiri, they are found amongst octopus and fish motifs; at Ahu Ra'ai, they are associated with tuna and shark. They are located in all parts of the island, as well as on Motu Nui. Yet another "mystery" of Easter Island!

But to return to the finely carved and proportioned statue offered on eBay, it appeared to me to be recent because it is so beautifully carved, so symmetrical, a miniature model of a finished Easter Island statue. It looks too good to be true and, when compared to the verified examples, I have to assume it to be a modern piece being offered up to the unwary as an antique.

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